

DEFLECTING PAIN

SERIES: ONE NECESSARY THING



Catalog No. 20120429
Judges 11:29-12:15
16th Message
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April 29, 2012

In an episode of the HBO series *In Treatment*, Dr. Paul Weston, a therapist, asks his fuming client, “Is it easier to be angry with me than to look at your own pain?” The answer for most of us, not just television characters, is yes, it’s easier. It’s easier to be angry with others than to deal with emotional wounds.

The story of Jephthah is the story of a deeply wounded man. It does not end well, not least because of the way he deals with—or doesn’t deal with—his emotional wounds. How our stories end will turn at least in part on how we deal with our wounds. First, Jephthah’s story. Jephthah, a leader in Israel, tried to dissuade the king of Ammon from his militaristic policies, but the king refused to back down. Jephthah, in turn, prepares for war.

Jephthah makes a vow

Judges 11:29-33:

²⁹Then the Spirit of the LORD came on Jephthah. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from there he advanced against the Ammonites. ³⁰And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD: “If you give the Ammonites into my hands, ³¹whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD’s, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.”

³²Then Jephthah went over to fight the Ammonites, and the LORD gave them into his hands. ³³He devastated twenty towns from Aroer to the vicinity of Minnith, as far as Abel Keramim. Thus Israel subdued Ammon.

In his message to the king of Ammon, Jephthah gave every appearance of believing that the Lord would grant the Israelites victory. Back then, he left everything in the hands of the Lord: “Let the Lord, the Judge, decide the dispute this day between the Israelites and the Ammonites” (Judges 11:27). Indeed, as the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him, Jephthah seems poised to lead his troops to victory.

Nevertheless, he attempts to secure the Lord’s empowerment for victory by means of a vow. If you grant me victory over the Ammonites, Jephthah tells the Lord, then I’ll give you a burnt offering, which symbolizes total devotion. Why not offer the burnt offering before the battle? Because Jephthah isn’t totally devoted to the Lord. Jephthah will only give the Lord his devotion if the Lord comes through for him on his terms. He seeks not to worship the Lord but to manipulate him. In this regard, Jephthah treats the Lord as if he were simply another pagan god.

Jephthah does with the Lord what he did with the Israelite leaders and the Ammonite king: he negotiates. He’s good with words, and he uses them. But the effectiveness of Jephthah’s words is trending downward. Although he won over the Israelites, the king of Ammon disregarded him, and now the Lord meets his vow with silence.

Vow or no vow, the Lord crushes the Ammonites and delivers the Israelites.

To vow or not to vow?

Taken as a whole, the Scriptures don’t prohibit the making of condition-based vows to God (though the author of Judges condemns the kind of vow that Jephthah made, of course). The Hebrew Scriptures allowed for such vows and regulated them. However, the New Testament, aside from Jesus’ condemnation of certain kinds of vows, has almost nothing to say on the subject (Mark 7:9-13).

I have heard many contemporary stories of men and women who, prior to coming to faith or at the outset of their journey of faith, promised to do something for God if he did something for them. In many cases, by all appearances, God answered their prayers, and those who had made the vows have followed through with devotion to him. During each of my three trips to India, for example, people told me that they had begun following Jesus, in fulfillment of a vow, after God had answered their specific prayers for deliverance. In one case, a man told me he had come to Christ and started a church in a Muslim slum, in fulfillment of a vow, after Jesus had resuscitated his son. I preached in that church. What can I do but praise God for

his vow? God has a penchant for meeting us where we are.

However, in light of what God has done for us in the death and resurrection of his Son, the path of spiritual growth for followers of Jesus should take them beyond the place where they pledge devotion to God on the condition that he come through for them on their terms. At some point, the making of a condition-based vow becomes not worship but manipulation, an effort to control the future instead of trusting God for it.

Victory in hand, Jephthah returns home the conquering hero. But what about his vow?

Jephthah keeps his vow

Judges 11:34-40:

³⁴When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of timbrels! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. ³⁵When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, “Oh no, my daughter! You have brought me down and I am devastated. I have made a vow to the LORD that I cannot break.”

³⁶“My father,” she replied, “you have given your word to the LORD. Do to me just as you promised, now that the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites. ³⁷But grant me this one request,” she said. “Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends, because I will never marry.”

³⁸“You may go,” he said. And he let her go for two months. She and her friends went into the hills and wept because she would never marry. ³⁹After the two months, she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin.

From this comes the Israelite tradition ⁴⁰that each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

Jephthah had vowed to sacrifice whatever came from his house to greet him, and the “whatever” turns out to be a “whoever.” Actually, the Hebrew word can also be translated “whoever.” Jephthah knew that a human might

be the first to meet him, but he hoped that his willingness to offer a human, even a member of his family, would impress the Lord. Alas, the Lord no doubt was none too impressed. Pagans like the Ammonites sacrificed their children, and the Lord specifically forbade his people from doing so (Deuteronomy 12:31). Again, Jephthah worships like a pagan.

Ironically, Jephthah’s daughter heralded him with music and dancing to celebrate his triumph, but her emergence from the house signals not his triumph but his folly, magnified by the fact that she is his only child. When Jephthah breaks the news to his daughter, he refuses to take responsibility for his vow and plays the victim, focusing on his feelings, not hers: “You have brought me down and I am devastated.”

On the one hand, Jephthah, who says he can’t go back on his word to the Lord, is to be commended for taking a vow seriously, but on the other hand, the Lord commanded his people not to sacrifice their children. Therefore, Jephthah could have chosen the lesser of two evils and forsaken his vow for the sake of his daughter. However, earlier he extracted a vow from the leaders of Gilead, who promised to make him their leader (Judges 11:4-11). Jephthah may be concerned about losing face before Gilead if he goes back on his own vow. In any event, Jephthah’s daughter sees her life—and her death—as bound together with her father’s victory, and she willingly accepts her fate.

Now we find that Jephthah’s daughter, his only child, was a virgin—meaning, especially, that she had no children. Jephthah grants his daughter’s request to mourn for her state with her friends in the hills. When she greeted her father, she danced; when she leaves him, she weeps. After his daughter mourned for two months, Jephthah “did to her as he had vowed.” Did what? The narrator spares us the details but leaves little doubt: Jephthah sacrificed his daughter as a burnt offering. She died, unmarried and childless. Jephthah sacrificed his daughter, and any future heirs, on the altar of his own ambitions. Jephthah was born of a prostitute, and his line dies with his virgin daughter.

Every year, the young women of Israel commemorated Jephthah’s daughter in order to remember her and her loss. Presumably, no one in Israel commemorated Jephthah and his vow.

Jephthah’s vow was both ill-advised and unnecessary. The Spirit of the Lord had come upon him, and he was poised for victory. Furthermore, the vow overshadows the Lord’s victory. The account of the battle takes two verses; the account of the vow and its aftermath takes nine verses.

And what do the Israelites get? They trade the oppressor without, Ammon, for the oppressor within, Jephthah. If he is willing to sacrifice his own daughter, what else—rather, who else—is he willing to sacrifice?

Devotion that hurts

We might like to think that God is impressed with what we're willing to part with for his sake. Maybe, we think, in light of our level of commitment, he'll give us what we want. Many of us view God as the Great Withholder: he has the power to give, but he doesn't give. Therefore, we feel compelled to somehow prove ourselves to him in order to pry from him what we want.

Our Jephthah-like devotion doesn't impress God; on the contrary, it tends to harm those who are closest to us. Some, for example, in supposed devotion to the Lord, sacrifice their families. They sublimate their obligations as spouses or parents to the supposedly greater obligation to serve God in the world. How many pastors' children grow up to resent the church because one or both of their parents gave everything to the church and nothing to them? Some are left to wonder: was the pastor devoting himself to the Lord or to his own ambitions? How many pastors' children have been sacrificed, so to speak, in the name of the Lord?

For some of us, our victories represent not our triumph but our folly. Even so, some, like Jephthah, will play the victim, refusing to take responsibility for their actions while blaming others, even their own children, for getting in the way of their dreams. Sometimes, those who come off as the most spiritual do the most damage.

Jephthah turns his attention from the enemy without, Ammon, to the enemy within, Ephraim.

Jephthah and the Ephraimites

Judges 12:1-7:

¹The Ephraimite forces were called out, and they crossed over to Zaphon. They said to Jephthah, "Why did you go to fight the Ammonites without calling us to go with you? We're going to burn down your house over your head."

²Jephthah answered, "I and my people were engaged in a great struggle with the Ammonites,

and although I called, you didn't save me out of their hands. ³When I saw that you wouldn't help, I took my life in my hands and crossed over to fight the Ammonites, and the LORD gave me the victory over them. Now why have you come up today to fight me?"

⁴Jephthah then called together the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. The Gileadites struck them down because the Ephraimites had said, "You Gileadites are renegades from Ephraim and Manasseh." ⁵The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan leading to Ephraim, and whenever a survivor of Ephraim said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead asked him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he replied, "No," ⁶they said, "All right, say 'Shibboleth.'" If he said, "Sibboleth," because he could not pronounce the word correctly, they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand Ephraimites were killed at that time.

⁷Jephthah led Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in a town in Gilead.

Ephraim, an Israelite tribe from west of the Jordan, feels left out again. Earlier, the Ephraimites were insulted that Gideon went to war against the pagan Midianites without them, but whereas Gideon was able to mollify them, Jephthah, whose negotiating effectiveness has fallen on hard times of late, doesn't even try to defuse the crisis. The Ephraimites, who were oppressed by the nation that Jephthah has just defeated, threaten to burn down their liberator's house for not inviting them to the party (Judges 10:9). The Ephraimites come off as ungrateful upstarts.

Jephthah, on the other hand, shows less patience with his fellow Israelites than with the Ammonites. He responds to the Ephraimites' accusation with an accusation of his own: he says he invited them to the party but that they didn't come. However, because the narrator has reported no such invitation, it's doubtful that Jephthah ever issued one. In any case, whereas the Ephraimites promised to burn down Jephthah's house before even hearing his side of the story, Jephthah likewise takes the fight to the Ephraimites without giving them a chance to respond to his counter-accusation. Earlier, when dealing with an antagonistic pagan king, Jephthah said, "Let the Lord, the Judge, decide the dispute this day between the Israelites and the Ammonites" (Judges 11:27). He makes no such appeal in this case, however.

What gives? Specifically, Jephthah attacks and defeats the Ephraimites because of their accusation that the Gileadites, who hailed from east of the Jordan, were renegades from western tribes. For Jephthah, who was driven from Gilead because he was the son of a prostitute and then was brought back for his military prowess, them's fightin' words. The Ephraimites are accusing the Gileadites of being renegades, whereas Jephthah, the leader of the Gileadites, was forced into the life of a renegade (Judges 11:1-3). We might imagine that Jephthah has been slighted by such aspersions his entire life.

Apparently, the Ephraimites pronounced a word, *Shibboleth*, differently from the Gileadites, who exploited the difference to identify and kill the stragglers of Ephraim at the fords of the Jordan River. Earlier in the book of Judges, the Ephraimites themselves seized the fords of the Jordan and slew the pagan Moabites (Judges 3:27-30). Now, in a horrible reversal, the Ephraimites meet their demise at the fords of the Jordan, not at the hands of pagans but at the hands of fellow Israelites. Jephthah, who slew his daughter for the sake of personal ambition, now slays forty-two thousand fellow Israelites because of a personal slight. Things in Israel are not heading in the right direction.

Israelites square off against Israelites, an awful harbinger of things to come, not only in the book of Judges but also in the later history of Israel, after the days of David and Solomon. Jephthah may have judged Israel for six years, but, unlike other judges, he merits nary a comment about turning back any threat or winning any peace.

Thus Jephthah's story comes full circle. When he appeared in the narrative, he was driven from his home and forced into the life of a renegade. When he bows out of the narrative, he kills thousands of men for calling him a renegade.¹

Hurt people hurt people

Why did Jephthah make his ill-advised and unnecessary vow? Why did he sacrifice his daughter? Why did he slaughter forty-two thousand of his countrymen? Motivations, which are often multifaceted, can be difficult to discern. But from one angle, it can be said that Jephthah wreaked such destruction because of an untreated wound. He never recovered from being driven from home. Therefore, his wound took over his life. Clearly, in view of his interactions with his daughter, he saw himself as a victim. By all appearances, Jephthah felt he had to prove himself.

Some animals are more dangerous wounded than healthy. Wounded people often wound others. For wounded people, an accusation, or even an innocuous comment, if it provokes a painful memory, can feel like a dagger to the heart. What do you do when you're wounded? In one way or another, you fight back. Victims of abuse sometimes grow up to abuse others. It's usually not the quarterback but the outcast who arms himself with semiautomatic weapons and turns the school cafeteria into a war zone.

Sandra Wilson, in her book *Hurt People Hurt People*, writes,

*Rather than acknowledging the existence of our invisible inner injuries and treating them, we often attempt to distance ourselves from them by deflecting our pain onto those around us. And, typically, we hurt others most deeply in the areas of our deepest wounding.*²

It's easier to be angry with others than to look at your own pain.

An outcast is healed

Jephthah's wound went untreated. It is not true that time heals all wounds; it's what you do in time that makes the difference. What might we do with our wounds in the time we have so that we stop hurting even those around us? Much can and should be said, but for now, in the time we have today, consider this story of an anonymous woman:

Like Jephthah, she was an outcast. Because of her condition, everyone considered her unfit for normal social intercourse. She had spent all that she had on doctors, but her condition had worsened. She lived on the margins of society. Because of her condition, anyone she came in contact with also became unfit, albeit temporarily.

When a man reported to have healing powers came to town, with a large crowd following him, she snuck up behind him and touched his clothes. She had reasoned that if she managed to fight her way through the crowd and just touch part of his garment, she would be healed.

She was right—in part. The perpetual flow of blood that had tormented her for twelve years dried up, and she felt in her body that she had been healed. The man's power to heal overwhelmed the woman's power to corrupt. She didn't make him unfit; on the contrary, he made her fit. Still, she needed something more. The man, knowing that power to heal had proceeded from him, stopped in his tracks, breaking off an urgent mission to help a dying

girl. He looked around for the woman. In the past, the only reason anyone looked around for her was to avoid her.

The woman, fearing the potential recriminations for touching someone in her unfit condition, nevertheless identified herself and fell before the man. She told him the whole truth. She unburdened herself before the one who had helped her. The man addressed the woman, who had been excluded by her world, in an inclusive and intimate way, calling her “daughter.” He commended her faith. When he saw the woman, who was afraid of being seen, he didn’t see an outcast but a “daughter.” He saw not her filth but her faith. Finally, Jesus of Nazareth bade the woman to depart in peace and assured her that her healing was not temporary but permanent—meaning, especially, that she could be restored to the community from which she had been excluded (Mark 5:25-34).

The healing of the woman foreshadowed the death of Christ, whereby healing not just for one but for all came about, not by the stoppage of blood but by the flow of blood—the flow of Christ’s blood from the cross.

Come to Jesus

What do we learn from the bleeding woman about treating emotional wounds? First, come to Jesus. It may be helpful to, in your mind’s eye, enter his presence. Take the risk of being disappointed and reach out to him. Second, tell the Lord the whole truth. Go as deep into your heart as you can and as far back as you must. Find words for your thoughts. It may also be helpful to put the words to paper. Words express thoughts, and once expressed, they unlock feelings. Tell the Lord not what you’re supposed to think and feel but what you actually think and feel. Trust him with everything. For wounds to be healed, they must be exposed. Expose your wounds to the healing love of Jesus, for he sees not your filth but your faith. He calls you daughter; he calls you son. He says you belong to him—and to his people.

Seventeen years ago, I began to wonder whether wounds from the past were controlling me in the present, so I went on my first ever personal retreat to meet with the Lord. With pen and paper, I visited whatever events I happened to remember. I attempted to tell the Lord the whole truth. At one point, when a particularly painful memory surfaced, I stopped writing, stood up, pointed at what I had written, and lamented, “That shouldn’t have happened!” I said what I actually felt, not what I thought I was supposed to feel. A few moments later, I sensed the Lord telling me something like, “Yes, I know, but I was there.” The impression of those words brought some measure of healing by assuring me that the Lord had been

actively present and working even back then, before I came to know him, to replace ashes with a crown of beauty.

As we expose our wounds to the love of Jesus, he begins to heal us of our need to prove ourselves and inspires us to sacrifice not our children as burnt offerings (of course!) but our entire lives as living sacrifices. In view of the sacrifice of God’s Son (not the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter!), Paul writes, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship” (Romans 12:1). If we think we need to impress the Great Withholder with what we’re willing to part with to pry from him what we want, Jesus would remind us that “Your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:8). When you come to Jesus, he heals you—or, more likely, he begins to heal you, for if he healed you all at once, you might say thank you very much and be on your way, never to return again.

Wounds into ministry

Wilson writes,

*All of us must answer this question: Will we continue to run the assigned laps in a wretched relay of intergenerational pain—that ongoing cycle of hurting, hating, and hurting again? Or will we stop running, break the cycle, and start a new cycle of healing and helping?*³

Jephthah, spurned by his immediate family, ran the assigned laps in the wretched relay, passing the baton of pain off both to his daughter and his fellow Israelites.

Jesus, who ran a different sort of race, shows us the way forward. He was a victim, for though he was innocent, he was crucified and abused mercilessly. The only sinless man suffered for the sins of the entire world. Jesus, however, refused to see himself as a victim: “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23). He did not deflect any of the pain he suffered onto others; instead, all of it died with him. In fact, he gave back good for evil, blessing for curse, and prayer for persecution: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).⁴

Finally, then, Jesus converts wounds into ministry. He often gives you a passion for those who have been wounded like you. Every wound, then, conceals a ministry. The place where you hurt the most may be the place you have the most to offer. The church, after all, is not a hospital; spiritually speaking, it’s a military outpost with

an infirmary.⁵ Jesus binds up our wounds not that we might serve ourselves but that we might serve a greater purpose. Jephthah saw himself as a victim and deflected his pain on to others, but Jesus heals us and sends us out, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to bless even those who have wounded us.

Are you running in the wretched relay? Are you deflecting pain onto others? Come to Jesus. Tell him everything.

NOTES

¹Judges 10:1-5 and 12:8-15, two passages that feature brief descriptions of other judges, frame the Jephthah sequence. Taken together, the two passages portray the decline of Israel. In the first passage, a judge embraces the trappings of pagan royalty, having thirty sons, the apparent progeny of a harem, who rode on thirty donkeys, animals used by kings. In the second passage, one judge also has thirty sons, but he compounds his pagan lifestyle by giving them in marriage to foreign women, and another judge ups his total to forty sons, thirty grandsons, and seventy donkeys.

²Sandra Wilson, *Hurt People Hurt People* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Discovery House Publishers, 2001).

³Wilson, 229.

⁴N.T. Wright, *The Crown and the Fire* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 52.

⁵Neil Anderson, *Overcoming Doubt* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 2004) 39.